

The Expulsion of the Chinese from Oregon City

By: Anjuli Grantham

At 8:30 PM on February 22, 1886, a group of men gathered at the Phoenix Hotel in Oregon City, Oregon.¹ Earlier that day, at a meeting attended by local Knights of Labor, Anti-Coolie Association members and Nathan L. Baker, a newspaper reporter in Portland and leader of the Anti-Coolie Association, it was decided that decisive action was required to address the continued presence of the Chinese in Oregon City.² That evening at the Phoenix Hotel the majority of those gathered voted to drive the Chinese from Oregon City that very night. The men³ elected Nat Baker as captain and organized themselves into 6 or 7 squads; each squad elected a “lieutenant.”⁴ Around midnight, the group of men marched from the Phoenix Hotel to the Washington Hotel, where Chinese employees of the Jacobs Bros. woolen mill roomed.⁵

Once the mob arrived at the hotel, Nat Baker instructed the men to scatter if their plot was interrupted. One squad was stationed at the front door and another at the rear.⁶ Myers recalled that “In the twinkling of an eye, the Orientals were told to get up, pack their belongings. They obeyed without a hitch in the proceedings. . . Between the members of the ‘surprise’ party the yellow men were marched down to the dock.”⁷ There, the group found the steamboat *Latona*⁸ “in waiting, at the foot of Ninth Street.

¹ The author can be contacted at anjuligrantham@gmail.com. Many of the specific details concerning the expulsion itself are drawn from three articles in *The Banner Courier*, written by W.W. Myers thirty eight years after the event. Mr. Myers, also known as “Uncle Billy”, was an Oregon City man who participated in the pogrom. There are inconsistencies and errors within the recollections, including the number of squads and the name of the steamboat. Please note that many of the details recounted by Mr. Myers that are repeated here are unverifiable. Even though the only reference to the meeting at the Phoenix Hotel comes from Mr. Myer and his vacillating memories of the evening, he repeatedly asserts that the hotel was the meeting point, lending credence to this assertion. The McLoughlin House, the former home of Dr. John McLoughlin, was converted into the Phoenix Hotel by 1874.

² Aside from himself and Nat Baker, Myers notes that Oregon City residents Al White, Jersey Stafford and “Berlyle” participated in the expulsion.

³ W.W. Myers reported that there were 42, while *The Oregonian* claimed there were “about sixty” men involved. “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City,” *The Banner Courier*, March 6, 1924; “Another Outrage,” *The Oregonian*, February 23, 1886.

⁴ W.W. Myer initially remembered that there were 7 squads, but in the next installation he recalled 6. “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City,” *The Banner Courier*, March 6, 1924; “‘Deportation Act’ of Long Years Ago is Told Serially,” *The Banner Courier*, March 13, 1924.

⁵ The Washington Hotel appears to have been very close to the Phoenix Hotel, as Myers recalls it as being where the Hawley Mill Co. stood in 1924. The Phoenix Hotel was directly across the street from the Jacob Bros. mill.

⁶ “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City is Told Serially,” *The Banner Courier*, March 20, 1924.

⁷ “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City,” *The Banner Courier*, March 6, 1924.

⁸ Myers recalled the name of the boat as *Altoona*, but according to contemporaneous newspaper accounts the boat was actually the *Latona*.

And when all the Celestials in the company were on board the boat without a sound of whistle or gong slipped away from her mooring. . .headed for Portland.”⁹

Myers’ relatively peaceful account of the incident differs greatly from that published the morning after the event in *The Oregonian*. Still in the Washington Hotel, the mob “pulled the Chinese out of their bunks, cuffed them around, twisted their queues, robbed them of what money they had in their pockets and notified them that they must leave forthwith.” While Myers insisted that the mob was unarmed, *The Oregonian* reported that “several of the rioters held revolvers to [the bodies of the Chinese] and threatened to kill them if they blew a whistle or uttered a cry.”¹⁰

The actual number of Chinese workers expelled that night varies from source to source. *The Oregonian* reported that 39 or 40 men were forced aboard the *Latona*, while the *Portland Daily News* claimed that there were 55 men who disembarked in Portland.¹¹ The banished individuals were loom operators and workers in the finishing room of the Jacobs Bros. woolen mill. Several weeks prior to this incident, the wool mill began replacing Chinese workers with white workers, and, according to *The Oregonian*, “it was the intention to let all the Chinese go as soon as white persons could be obtained and trained to the work.”¹² The orchestrated attack did not completely rid Oregon City of its Chinese population, since “fifteen to twenty Chinese” remained.¹³

On February 23, Al White and Nat Baker were arrested. Their bail was set at \$1800 each and was posted by Myers and another individual.¹⁴ On February 25, six other participants, including Myers, were arrested. On March 2, they appeared before the grand jury presided over by Judge Matthew Deady, Federal District Judge for Oregon. However, due to the result of a similar case in California, the men were never brought to trial.¹⁵

This was not the first case of concerted anti-Chinese action in Oregon City. In 1872, a fire destroyed the Jacob Bros. woolen mill in Oregon City, and was suspected to be the work of arsonists protesting the employment of Chinese workers. However, the spring of 1886 was a time of particularly rampant anti-Chinese fervor, flamed by an Anti-Chinese Congress meeting held in Portland on February 13. On the very evening of the

⁹ “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City is Told Serially,” *The Banner Courier*, March 20, 1924.

¹⁰ “Another Outrage,” *The Oregonian*, February 23, 1886.

¹¹ “Another Outrage,” *The Oregonian*, February 23, 1886; *Portland Daily News*, February 23, 1886. The name of one of the men driven from town was Wong Chung.

¹² “The Oregon City Outrage,” *The Oregonian*, February 23, 1886.

¹³ “Another Outrage,” *The Oregonian*, February 23, 1886.

¹⁴ “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City,” *The Banner Courier*, March 6, 1924.

¹⁵ “Why No Chinatown in Oregon City,” *The Banner Courier*, March 6, 1924; Charles J. McClain, Jr. “The Chinese Struggle for Civil Rights in 19th-Century America: The Unusual Case of *Baldwin v. Franks*,” *Law and History Review*, 3 (Fall 1985), 357-358.

Oregon City expulsion, the Oregon towns of Beaver Valley and Butteville also forced their Chinese neighbors aboard a boat headed to Portland.¹⁶ In Portland that same evening there was an anti-Chinese demonstration, in which 3,500 individuals carried torches and placards bearing statements like “We say the Chinese must go,” as they marched through the streets.¹⁷ During the same season, anti-Chinese riots occurred in East Portland, Albina, and Mount Tabor, where dozens of Chinese woodchoppers were expelled.¹⁸ Serious anti-Chinese riots and larger expulsions occurred in both Washington and California at this time, and the history of the events in those two states has been documented by historians. Conversely, the story of anti-Chinese activity in Oregon has received only the briefest of treatments.¹⁹

The McLoughlin House only played a marginal role in this sad episode. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to consider how this incident reflects Oregon’s problematic racial past. In addition, it may be useful to consider how these events fit within the broader narrative of the McLoughlin House, a narrative that until now has emphasized the more heroic occurrences in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

¹⁶ “The Work Goes On. The Chinese in Beaver Valley Leave by Special Request,” and “Butteville Imitates Oregon City,” *Portland Daily News*, February 26, 1886.

¹⁷ “A Demonstration,” *Portland Daily News*, February 23, 1886.

¹⁸ Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 160.

¹⁹ Published sources that mention anti-Chinese activity in Oregon include Jewel Lansing, *Portland: People, Politics and Power 1851-2001* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 187; Gregory R. Nokes, “‘A Most Daring Outrage’: Murders at Chinese Massacre Cove, 1887,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 107 (Fall 2006): 326-343; Gregory R. Nokes, *Massacred for Gold: the Chinese in Hells Canyon* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007); Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*. Two works that provide particularly insightful analysis into the anti-Chinese fervor in the Northwest are Carlos A. Schwantes, “Protest in a Promised Land: Unemployment, Disinheritance, and the Origin of Labor Militancy in the Pacific Northwest, 1885-1886,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 13 (Oct 1982): 373-390; and Kornel Chang, “Circulating Race and Empire: Transnational Labor Activism and the Politics of Anti-Asian Agitation in the Anglo-American Pacific World, 1880-1910,” *Journal of American History* 96 (Dec 2009), 678-701.